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There's A Great Deal For The U.S. To Celebrate In China's Rise

By: Doug Bandow – June 4, 2013

Four decades ago the People's Republic of China was a closed and mysterious, even forbidding, society. Mao Zedong and his fellow communist revolutionaries turned an impoverished, backward, authoritarian mess into a starving, retrograde, totalitarian horror.

But the 1970s saw the famed opening to the West. Mao's death a decade later allowed Deng Xiaoping to take control as "paramount leader" and initiate reforms that unleashed the creativity of the Chinese people. The PRC has gone from isolated backwater to emerging giant. The high rise office buildings, luxury hotels, flashy advertisements, foreign automobiles, and traffic jams could belong to any big city in the West. Young people sport trendy hair cuts, stylish clothes, tattoos, and piercings. Mao, the "Great Helmsman," would not recognize today's China.

The international order also is changing. A century and a half ago the U.S. was "rising" in the world. That process forced other nations to adjust. A similar process is happening with the PRC. Its neighbors, as well as the United States, must adjust in turn.

Chinese President Xi Jinping is meeting President Barack Obama in California this week, the first time they will talk as leaders of the globe's superpower and Asia's emerging regional great power, respectively. Much is at stake in their administrations forging a working relationship that can make the international adjustment process as smooth and peaceful as possible.

In May President Xi told National Security Adviser Tom Donilon that "The current China-U.S. relationship is at a critical juncture to build on past successes and open up new dimensions for the future." Those "new dimensions" remain undecided.

There is abundant cause for misunderstanding and disagreement across a range of issues. Treating each other as adversaries, as advocated by some in both countries, would be disastrous. Neither nation, nor Asia and the world, would benefit from conflict between the two. In contrast, much could be achieved if the world's superpower and incipient superpower develop a cooperative relationship.

Chinese officials with whom I spoke last week in Beijing promoted the idea of the "Chinese Dream," a campaign to uplift China and contrast with the oft-cited "American Dream." One conference participant argued that "though we have different dreams, we can seek to sleep in the same bed." Chinese conferees also spoke of a new "great power relationship" to reshape ties between Beijing and Washington.

While I heard a lot of boilerplate rhetoric, Liu Jieyi, Vice Minister of the Communist Party's International Department, rightly argued that "there are many issues where we have common interests and common responsibilities." Emphasizing such areas may help the two nations work

through other, more difficult issues. In contrast to the Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union, which mixed ideology and geopolitics, our present differences don't constitute "structural and irreconcilable conflicts and problems," in Liu's words.

The relationship could be complicated by Chinese political developments. The PRC faces enormous internal stresses, with falling public legitimacy for a Communist Party seen as corrupt and unaccountable. But even more liberal urban dwellers might not favor full democracy empowering hundreds of millions of still poor peasants. And full democracy might exacerbate nationalistic sentiments, threatening to disrupt regional peace and stability.

Economic disputes may represent the most common, and most public, bilateral disputes. America's poor economy has accentuated U.S. concerns about job losses from imports. However, Americans won't be able to sell abroad if they prevent others from selling at home. Moreover, inexpensive imported goods act as an economic stimulant, allowing consumers to get more for less.

A shared interest in economic growth should keep the two countries working together. Both nations benefit from investment and trade—which now exceeds a half trillion dollars a year. The U.S. faces continuing economic challenges while the PRC faces potentially even greater problems, including bad banks, inefficient state enterprises, property bubbles, and distorted demography. The two countries should encourage increased commercial interaction rather than threaten economic war.

Increased cooperation would be beneficial and should be easier to attain in other areas. In a meeting last week, argued Wang Jiarui, Minister of the Communist Party's International Department and Vice Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the two governments should "stress cooperation for common interest of the two countries" and "develop a relationship of mutual trust rather than mutual suspicion."

Obviously, it is easier to articulate such desires than to accomplish them in practice. Nevertheless, peacekeeping, anti-piracy operations, environmental protection, humanitarian relief, combating terrorism, and conflict resolution are other areas where the PRC has much to offer not only the U.S. but also the broader international community. Cooperation in these areas also could encourage development of a habit of cooperation.

Given sometimes conflicting national interests, it will take more than increased trust to overcome differences. The key to addressing the more difficult issues, argue Ian Bremmer of the Eurasia Group and Jon Huntsman, Jr., former U.S. ambassador to China, is for U.S. officials: "to stop trying to negotiate with the China they want to see and engage China as it is."

Human rights, for instance, will continue to divide the two nations. Neither government can impose its view on the other, but respectful dialogue is necessary.

Beijing may view the issue as an internal matter, but that won't make multiple controversies disappear. The PRC must recognize that Americans believe deeply that the very nature of the human person demands that governments respect their citizens' lives, liberty, and dignity. This principle influences Americans' willingness to cooperate with other nations. The two nations' long-term relationship depends on the ability to discuss their perspectives despite their differences.

Chinese cyber-attacks pose an equally vexing issue. Beijing's claim that the PRC, too, suffers from electronic intrusions cannot disguise evidence of assaults emanating from Chinese territory. Government probes of the other's cyber-defenses are to be expected, but the seemingly official assault on private American companies represents a dangerous escalation. This

campaign also risks undermining U.S. business support for improved bilateral ties, heretofore a political bulwark against legislative restrictions.

Military and security matters may pose the greatest challenge to the relationship. Both the U.S. and China have significant security interests that conflict to varying degrees. This is unfortunate but hardly unexpected. Critical is finding a way to peacefully resolve these issues.

The rising Asian power China obviously is vitally interested in security questions in its region, just as the rising U.S. was vitally interested in security questions in the Americas. At the same time, this nation is a global power with significant Asian interests. Washington isn't going to abandon them.

Nevertheless, there is no reason for conflict. Beijing's military build-up remains measured, as the growth in military expenditures tracks China's economic growth rate. The PRC has neither the interest nor the capability to threaten America; the People's Liberation Army is emphasizing potential contingencies involving Taiwan and creating the ability to deter U.S. intervention. At issue is not American security, but American domination along China's borders, something very different. There will be no Chinese naval flotilla sailing on Pearl Harbor, at least for a very, very long time.

Peace requires cooperation when possible and accommodation when necessary. That means a willingness to negotiate and compromise. The U.S. cannot expect to forever dominate China along its borders. Beijing cannot expect to dominate its neighbors, several of whom are long-time friends and allies of America.

What the PRC most needs to complete its development process is peace. Over the last century China has fought battles ranging from border skirmishes to full wars with several of its neighbors: Japan, South Korea, India, Soviet Union, and Vietnam. Relations with all five remain scarred by the earlier conflicts. Liu Jieyi argued that "China has no interest in disrupting the existing order," which has helped Beijing escape the disadvantages of the past.

East Asian states as well as the U.S. would benefit from development of regional security architecture which accounted for America's and China's sometimes competing regional and international security interests. The broader and more communal the system, the more likely it would take into account all nations' perspective. The more extensive the cooperation, the easier for Washington to step back and act as an "off-shore balancer" focused on America's security interests rather than continue as an incessant meddler determined to micro-manage East Asian affairs.

Neither the U.S. nor China can be expected to sacrifice interests that they believe to be vital. However, both sides should acknowledge the legitimacy of the other's objectives, emphasize the importance of cooperating to meet shared ends, increase the transparency of military spending and activities, and develop mechanisms to resolve disputes peacefully. The two nations have long differed on important questions and will continue to do so. The question then is how to answer those questions in an acceptable if not perfect manner.

This challenge is highlighted by the increasing acrimony surrounding varying territorial claims involving the PRC, Japan, Philippines, and other East Asian states. Ownership in such cases is not easily adjudicated, since the conclusion depends on a complex mix of history, treaty, law, control, and practice. However, the recent naval confrontations mixed with U.S. security guarantees create a volatile mix with the frightening possibility—though still very low—of armed conflict stretching across the Pacific.

The PRC is vitally concerned about resolution of its sovereignty claims as well as the maintenance of peace. The U.S. is little at stake in the specific disputes but also is vitally

committed to the maintenance of peace. When asked about the issue, Wang simply stated that he hoped “the U.S. will not say something that will harm our relations.” He added: “You say that you don’t have a position on the Diaoyu [called Senkaku by Japan] Islands. That is good.”

There is no simple solution. Likely necessary is some mix of bilateral, regional, and international agreements that encourage resource and maritime cooperation while postponing resolution of sovereignty issues. The PRC obviously must participate; the U.S. would remain interested even if not directly involved.

Almost as volatile is North Korea. Pyongyang is threatening South Korea while challenging the international nonproliferation regime. Although the Kim Jong-un regime does not desire war, mistake or misjudgment could lead to conflict. Moreover, fear of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea inevitably creates pressure for the South and/or the U.S. to preempt militarily.

Dealing with the North requires cooperation among the PRC, U.S., and the North’s neighbors. Although many Americans blame Beijing for Pyongyang’s irresponsible behavior, China is legitimately concerned about the stability of the peninsula—preventing or containing a violent implosion which could result in conflict and refugees, avoiding the loss of economic opportunities, and forestalling the permanent basing of U.S. troops in a unified Korea bordering the PRC. The issue is not whether Americans sympathize with these concerns. Requesting Beijing’s cooperation requires Washington to address them.

In fact, the PRC has much to gain from the positive transformation of the North, whether accompanied by reunification or not. Although the PRC would no longer enjoy such a dominant position in a reunified peninsula, the economy would be much larger, more productive, and more prosperous—providing a better economic partner for China. In fact, explosive commercial growth followed establishment of diplomatic relations between the ROK and China in 1992.

The U.S., ROK, and Japan could coordinate with Beijing on policy toward the North in contingencies ranging from reform to collapse. The former states could offer to share the burden of caring for refugees and accept Chinese military intervention depending on circumstances. Most important, Washington and Seoul should indicate that a reunified peninsula would play no role in containing the PRC. Withdrawing American troops would be a small price for America to pay to resolve the North Korean problem.

Some U.S. officials worry that Beijing is attempting to spread its influence more widely. They seem to fear a Chinese empire stretching across Africa and Latin America. However, the PRC already is learning some of the same lessons that grew out of Washington’s Cold War competition with Moscow throughout the Third World.

Economic investment and foreign aid did not guarantee access to minerals, ensure the survival of friendly regimes, or generate enduring popularity. Purchasing energy resources today does not prevent them from being nationalized tomorrow. In fact, opposition to Chinese activities has been rising in nations as different as Burma and Zambia. Washington shouldn’t spend a lot of time worrying about the PRC expanding its influence.

There is much to celebrate in China’s “rise.” Hundreds of millions of people who once were poor now live far better. A country that long was abused internationally now is treated with dignity. A great and creative civilization has become a full participant in the world economy and an increasingly important member of the international diplomatic community.

However, there are reasons other nations worry about China’s dramatic entry into the world system. The PRC’s political development over the last six decades has been tumultuous and

violent. China's political and military evolution remains at times obscure and uncertain. Beijing's commitment to peace has been affirmed in word but remains uncertain in deed.

History, too, gives pause. Even well-informed and well-intentioned people can make mistakes with enormous consequences. The last time a dominant power faced a rising power the results were divided. Great Britain accommodated the U.S. but confronted Imperial Germany. The former policy resulted in prosperity and friendship; the latter policy caused war and hardship. Washington and Beijing policymakers should resolve to follow the first example.

The Obama-Xi meeting would be a good place to start charting such a future. On some issues there is not just a bilateral gap but a bilateral gulf. The governments still have to work through such problems.

Doing so matters to both nations. It also affects Asia and the world. While international diplomats often exaggerate the importance of their work, Liu Jieyi really wasn't engaging in hyperbole when he argued that the two governments "have responsibility for the whole world and the development of humanity in the 21st Century." The most important relationship in coming years will be that between America and China. We all must make it a century of cooperation rather than confrontation.